

Peer Learning in HE: Students' Perceptions of the Benefits and Challenges in Becoming Peer Leaders in a Peer Assisted Learning Programme

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ABSTRACT

The Peer Assisted Learning Programme (PALP) was implemented at Sunway University to support students who are transitioning into their first year undergraduate programmes. Under PALP, peer assisted learning sessions for “at risk” subjects are facilitated by academically successful and trained peer leaders. In 2016, 35 peer leaders facilitated peer learning sessions for 8 undergraduate subjects, with a total of 718 peer learners. This paper reports peer leaders’ perception of their experience and the challenges that they faced in facilitating peer learning sessions. It also reports on the overall benefits that peer leaders perceived to have gained from the programme. Data was derived from peer leaders’ feedback at different stages of the programme and an online survey administered at the end of the programme. Peer leaders reported that their participation in the programme had enabled them to improve their knowledge and skills in five areas: subject matter, learner diversity, time management and project planning, communication skills and leadership skills. The peer leaders also reported 5 challenges during the programme: peer learners’ absence, irregular attendance and unpreparedness, late-joiners to the programme and high student number. Some suggestions on how the programme could be improved further are also discussed.

Keywords: peer-assisted learning, supplemental instruction, higher education

INTRODUCTION

One of the many challenges that academics face in ensuring that their students receive the necessary learning support for their subjects is the limited amount of time that they have with their students. With face-to-face interaction during class time being limited due to the number of students in class, the different pace at which students learn and the volume of learning materials that students need to engage with, additional support for both academics and their students are needed. Such support helps students manage their learning without at the same time over-burdening their lecturers. In that respect, students who have successfully transitioned into their first year of undergraduate and have performed well academically during their first year can become that needed learning resource and support for their peers. The implementation of peer learning support that is effectively managed within the institution enables students to gain additional learning support outside the classroom without overburdening the already stretched university resources and academic staff’s time (Boud, Cohen & Sampson, 2014).

Research has shown that peers have considerable influence on each other. At undergraduate level, it has been found that peers have significant and meaningful impact on each other. They are found to have an impact on their peers’ intellectual development, academic engagement, the discovery and establishment of academic and social concept, interpersonal skills and critical thinking skills (Greenfield, Keup & Gardner, 2013; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005)

In peer learning sessions that are facilitated by other students, the benefits are not restricted to peer learners only. Academically successful senior students who undertake the role of peer leaders/ facilitators during the learning sessions also derive benefits from their role. In one study, peer leaders reported an increase in confidence in their own ability to manage group dynamics and facilitate peer learning; they also reported an increase in empathy with peer learners (Harmon, 2006). In other studies, peer leaders reported that their participation in peer assisted learning sessions had led to improved interpersonal skills, organisational skills, time-management, presentation skills, written communication and academic skills (Keup, 2010; Newton & Ender, 2010). Peer leaders are also found to have gained benefits through improved ability in managing groups, interpersonal skills, critical thinking and problem solving skills (Wawrzynski & Beverly, 2012).

Peer Assisted Learning Programme (PALP) at Sunway University

Informed by the benefits of peer assisted learning sessions to students who regularly attend such sessions and the peer leaders who facilitate the sessions, PALP at Sunway University was first implemented in 2013. The programme was based on Supplemental Instruction and Peer Assisted Study Session model by the University of Wollongong. Within supplemental instruction sessions, the learning sessions are facilitated by more senior students and these sessions support subjects that are considered “high-risk” (Dawson, van der Meer, Skalicky & Cowley, 2014).

PALP and PALP peer leader role were developed fitting with the definition by Newton and Ender (2010, p.6) who state that peer leaders are:

Students who have been selected and trained to offer educational services to their peers. These services are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and persistence of students toward attainment of their educational goals. Students performing in [such] paraprofessional roles are usually compensated in some manner for their services and are supervised by qualified professionals.

The initial two years (2013-2014) was considered the pilot phase, with a very small number of peer leaders and peer learners selected. Beginning 2015, the programme was open to undergraduate students who were enrolled in the first year subjects that it supported. Subjects identified to be supported by PALP were those deemed to be “at risk” due 20% or more failure rates, a large number of students enrolled onto the subjects or both. Another reason for selecting first year subjects was also to support the undergraduates’ transitioning process from their previous level of study into their undergraduate programmes and help them develop learning skills needed for higher learning. Such support has helped with student retention beyond first year and students’ ability to move to higher level (Keup, 2013).

Programme Structure

Sunway University’s academic calendar comprise a 7-week semester that begins in January and two 14-week semesters that begin in March and August respectively. PALP-supported subjects, and as such, PALP itself, are offered in the March and August semesters. Recruitment process for peer leaders begins in January with programme promotion. Students who are interested and meet the set criteria are invited to submit their application. Criteria for eligibility are (1) completion of the first year of undergraduate studies (2) an average of B for subjects taken in the first year, and (3) at least a B for the subject(s) that the applicants wish to facilitate. Applicants are also required to include their personal statement and obtain a written support from at least one academic staff who had taught the students either during their first year or during their pre-university programmes.

There are two components to the peer leader selection process. Applicants who meet the criteria are called for an interview to determine their readiness for the peer leadership role. This is based on their academic performance (determined through their application and supporting evidence), their communication and problem solving skills (assessed during the interview). The second component is the 2-day training peer leader training programme. During this training, applicants are observed while they engage in the activities to further determine their communication and problem solving skills. In addition, their ability to work in a group is also assessed. Applicants who have successfully undergone the interview and the training programme are then formally appointed to become peer leaders of the programme. Peer learners are recruited at the commencement of the semester and peer learning sessions are then scheduled throughout the week during the semester. In performing their responsibilities, the peer leaders are supervised by the programme manager and are also given an allowance for attending trainings, meetings with the programme supervisor, session preparation and facilitation.

PALP Programme in 2016

In 2016, the Peer Assisted Learning Programme at Sunway University continued to support two schools within the university – the Business School and School of Science and Technology, with a total of 8 subjects supported. The programme had grown significantly in terms of the number of peer leaders, the number of peer learners and the number of peer learning sessions conducted within that year. The growth in number, in comparison to when the programme first began in 2013, is reflected in the table below.

Table 1: Number of peer leaders, peer learning sessions and peer learners in 2013 and 2016

	Peer Leaders		Sessions / week		Peer Learners	
	2013	2016	2013	2016	2013	2016
March	7	35	2	28	11	389
August	7	26	2	27	51	329
Total for the year	7	35	40	522	62	718

The table shows that in 2016, the number of peer leaders in the programme had increased from 7 to 35 while the number of peer assisted learning sessions had increased from 40 to 522. The number of peer learners had also increased from 62 to 718. The peer leaders for March semester that year were the same peer leaders who facilitated peer learning sessions in August but there was an attrition. A few peer leaders who moved into the final year of their study resigned from their position to focus on their final year while others cited personal commitments. Most peer leaders facilitated at least 2 groups of peer learning each semester. A small number facilitated either 3 groups per week or one group only. The maximum number of peer learners for each group was 10.

Given the increase in student involvement, as reflected by the table above, and the fact that the programme had stabilised, it was deemed important to explore the experiences of students who participated in the programme – both the peer leaders and the peer learners. However, for this study, the focus was on the peer leaders and their perception of the value of the programme to them.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study was undertaken to explore the answer to the following questions

1. What benefits did peer leaders gain from their role in PALP?
2. What challenges did peer leaders face when facilitating peer assisted learning sessions for PALP?
3. How can the programme be improved?

METHODOLOGY

This study took on a qualitative approach. Thirty-five students who were appointed as PALP peer leaders in 2016 agreed to participate in the study. However, only data collected from 26 peer leaders were included in the analysis as nine peer leaders had resigned after one cycle of the programme, as mentioned earlier. Five stated the need to focus on their final year studies as the reason and 4 stated personal reasons. Data collected from these peer leaders were not included as they did not have a full peer leader experience. Three methods of collecting peer leader feedback were carried out at different intervals during the programme. The first one was in the peer form of a “one-minute paper”. This was an open-ended feedback collected at the end of the 2-day training, before peer assisted learning sessions began in March 2016. The second peer leader feedback was collected through “poll-everywhere”, an online survey response system. It was administered after a one-day professional development workshop for the peer leaders, before the 2nd cycle of the peer assisted learning sessions began in August 2016. For both, the focus was on the value that peer leaders found from the 2-day training and the 1-day professional development workshop. Participants were asked what they had learned from the training/workshop, how they could apply what they learned to their role as a peer leader and further development they felt they needed to become effective peer leaders. The third method of collecting peer leader feedback was through a peer leader satisfaction survey. This was administered through Survey Monkey at the end of 2016, after the programme had ended for that year. The online satisfaction survey contained three open-ended questions on the peer leaders’ experience in the programme, what they had gained from it and how the programme could be improved. Feedback collected from the peer leaders was also correlated with data on PALP maintained by the institution.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Peer leaders’ responses were analysed and emerging themes were identified. Findings indicated that peer leaders perceived clear benefits from the programme and at the same time encountered several challenges. These are identified and discussed below.

1. Benefits gained from being a Peer Leader in the Peer Assisted Learning Programme

Peer leaders perceived their participation in the Peer Assisted Learning Programme had helped them to be more self-aware about their own personal development needs as undergraduates and their role as peer leaders. All peer leaders reported self-improvement in 8 areas:

- (1) Confidence
- (2) Interpersonal communication
- (3) Presentation skills
- (4) Understanding of learner diversity
- (5) Mentoring skills
- (6) Planning and time management
- (7) Leadership skills
- (8) Understanding of subject matter

Peer leaders attributed the benefits they gained to the training and professional development that they had undertaken and from carrying out their role as peer learning facilitators.

In relation to confidence, 23 per cent of the 26 peer leaders reported an improvement in their self-confidence. These peer leaders, at the start of the programme, perceived themselves to be introverts who were not usually comfortable among other people. They cited wanting to improve and their belief that the programme could help them improve as part of the reasons for signing up for the programme. One peer leader, for example, stated at the start of the programme, that she needed to improve her confidence and “not be so intimidated” by others. Another peer leader stated that he had signed up to become a peer leader to push himself: He said that he needed to “develop by opening up” himself and by understanding others more. He acknowledged having “shut” himself off from others due to his constant struggle “with a lot of failures” in his past. This peer leader, at the end of the programme, stated:

I have a long way to go. I still have to force myself to talk to other people, not to be so inward. But I signed up for it, so even when I didn’t want to, I had to prepare for my sessions and go...I think it wasn’t so bad. I tried, my group was nice to me. And when they see me [at other times], they smile or wave or come and talk to me. And I have to do the same. I’m their peer leader. I’m a little bit more confident now but still feel awkward.

In contrast to the 23 per cent who needed to improve their self-confidence and did by the end of the programme, one participant who already perceived himself to have high self-confidence learned that having high self-confidence included being able to take a step back so that others could step-up. He stated the following: “One area which I received feedback on at the beginning and agreed I needed to improve on was that I tended to be too dominant in certain situations. I learned that I needed to take a step back and allow my peers to take over from time to time.”

The second, third and fourth areas of improvements identified by the peer leaders were interpersonal communication skills, presentation skills and understanding of learner diversity, which they perceived to be closely related. While only 50 per cent of the peer leaders stated that they needed to improve their communication and presentation skills at the beginning of the programme, all of them reported improvements in these areas, albeit to a varying degree. Additionally, 69 per cent perceived that they had learned to develop empathy, be more open and patient, which helped in their communication with their peers. Peer leaders attributed these improvements directly to their role as a peer learning facilitators. The following are responses extracted from different peer leaders:

It helped me to understand that everybody has different learning method and that how little things we say may have great impact on them.

I think I am now able to understand the body language and facial expressions the mentees would give when they understand or do not understand something.

People have different ways of thinking, so understanding each of their personality is very important.

As illustrated in the examples above, having peer learners who learned differently and who might have had different learning needs emphasised to the peer leaders that they needed to be more open to learner diversity. They mentioned that they were more conscious of the need to empathise and be more flexible in the way that they facilitated learning sessions and the choice of learning strategies to be demonstrated during the learning sessions. The need to explain things in different ways to support their peers and pace the sessions to fit their needs, and the effort that they had put in, contributed to the peer leaders’ communication skills and presentation

skills improvement. As stated by a peer leader, “I believe that my communication skills have improved as I try to find different ways to explain my answers if they do not understand it when I explain using the first method.” Another pointed out, “These mentees would expect us [peer leaders] to be able to lead and guide them in the subject matter. As such, I would think of ways to be able to communicate effectively and cater to the needs of each mentee.” One peer leader summarised how he learned to be more open, to empathise and be more patient clearly by saying:

I’ve learnt that easy things... for me, may not be that easy for others. It’s linked to not taking things for granted. I’ve tried to look into the perspective of my peers, that maybe a topic that is easy for me, is magnified 5 times harder for my peers. They may be uncertain, scared, upset and disappointed with themselves for not [being] able to learn the same as others. The gap between people who get things easily and people who don’t get things easily is quite huge. Thus, I’ve learnt that I should see things not just from my point of view.

In addition to improving their communication skills, presentation skills and understanding of learner diversity, 42.3 per cent of the peer leaders felt that they had learned to become a mentor or to become a better mentor. Peer leaders reported the need to be “approachable” and “friendly” with their peer learning group. They also reported the importance of “listening” to their peers to try and understand the difficulties that their peers faced, instead of making assumptions. Peer leaders also highlighted that being a mentor and a facilitator of the programme meant that they had to get their peers to interact more with each other and contribute to the sessions. They felt that as a mentor, they had learned to be “encouraging” so that there was more participation. However, they might not have been as successful as they wanted due to challenges that will be discussed in the next section.

The sixth and seventh areas of improvements identified by the peer leaders were planning and time management, and leadership skills, which were perceived to be inter-related. Sixty-nine percent of the peer leaders perceived that they had improved in these areas at the end of the two-cycles of the Peer Assisted Learning Programme. Further analysis of the data showed that the peer leaders saw the improvement of leadership skills as being directly connected to the training that they received and their role as learning facilitators for their peers. However, they did not attribute specific elements of the training or professional development that they were given as the reasons for the improvement in planning and time-management skills. Instead, this was attributed as an outcome from having to manage their own studies, assignments, other leadership roles or co-curricular activities that they might have undertaken, as well as their own personal lives. As mentioned by some of them:

It has taught me to manage my time wisely between my studies, PALP, clubs and societies as well as the relationship I have with the people around me.

As I have to juggle between my studies, involvement in clubs and societies and PALP, PALP has contributed to helping me manage my time better and taught me to plan ahead.

Time management and organisational skills are very important and being a peer leader enabled me to refine those skills.

Finally, peer leaders also perceived improvement in their understanding of the subject matter. In this area, the peer leaders reported that they had become more aware of the learning strategies that they had used because they needed to share the learning strategies that worked for them. Having to articulate the learning strategies to their peers helped the peer leaders to become more conscious of their own learning strategies. Sharing of learning strategies, either with other peer leaders or with their own peer learning group also helped the peer leaders to have a bigger selection of learning techniques that they could adopt for themselves. Twenty-seven per cent of the peer leaders felt that facilitating peer learning sessions on a basic accounting subject that they had successfully completed helped them revise the subject and understand it better. This was useful preparation for them as they had other accounting subjects to take at a higher level. As stated by one peer leader, “While guiding my peers, I happen to learn and remember new things as well and this helps me in my own studies.”

2. Perceived challenges in facilitating peer-assisted learning sessions

Based on their experience facilitating peer assisted learning sessions for two 14-week semesters, the peer leaders identified 5 main challenges that they had faced, the causes they had attributed to each challenge and the impact the challenges had on the peer leaders and their peer learning group. These are reflected in the table below.

Table2: Peer leader challenges, perceived attributed causes and impact on peer leader and peer learning sessions

Challenges	Perceived attributed causes	Impact	
		<i>On peer leader</i>	<i>On learning session</i>
Absence	Lack of commitment	Demotivated Upset Frustrated	Limited discussion Lack of participation Lack of response
Irregular attendance	Lack of interest in learning		
Unprepared peer learners	Lack of interest in topic		
Late joiners	Unstated	Challenge in addressing basic topics and inability to proceed to more challenging topics	
High student number	High maximum capacity allowed	Difficulty to manage each session and to finish completing topics that needed to be covered	

As can be seen in the table above, the peer leaders attributed each challenge to a specific cause. Peer learners' absence and irregular attendance were perceived to be caused by a lack of commitment or a lack of interest on the part of the peer learners. Peer learners being unprepared was also seen as a sign of a lack of interest in the topic.

It was noted that the causes identified for peer learners' absence, irregular attendance and being unprepared were assumed causes that might not have been verified by the peer leaders. For example, one peer leader, in referring to students' irregular attendance to the learning sessions, stated, "It showed that those students are not interested in learning." Another peer leader made a similar statement, "It shows their lack of interest..." The first three challenges identified by the peer leaders impacted them emotionally. Peer leaders reported that they felt "demotivated", "upset" and "frustrated". For example, one stated, "It was very demotivating and upsetting when a handful of mentees do not let us know [of their absence] in advance and do not come." Another felt frustrated because it meant that she could not carry out what she had planned for the learning sessions because of the absence.

Peer learners' absence, irregular attendance and unpreparedness also impacted the learning sessions. Peer leaders felt that often, discussions became limited and that there was a lack of participation or response. One peer leader made an observation that as a result of these challenges, "I feel like have to spoon feed them. It is difficult for me to carry out any fruitful discussion as there will be little to no reply." The peer leaders perceived this challenge caused them to be less effective as mentors.

The fourth challenge identified by the peer leaders was students who joined the programme late into the semester. Twenty per cent of the peer leaders reported that they had peer learners who joined their sessions late in the semester. However, in this case, an assumption was not made and no reason was given. Peer leaders felt that some of those who joined their sessions late were were also very weak. It was challenging for them to help these peer learners with the basic topics while at the same time needing to support peers who have moved ahead to other topics. The peer leaders observed that a number of them were unable to catch-up while the peer leaders themselves felt that they were in a difficult situation. For example, a peer leader stated that she felt she "did not do well enough as a mentor" to ensure that those who joined her sessions later had "a better understanding of the subject."

The fifth and final challenge identified by the peer leaders was high student number in their learning sessions. Forty-six per cent of the peer leaders felt that the number of peer learners in their sessions was too high. One peer leader stated that it was difficult to manage her session because there was "almost 20 peer learners in her group". Another peer leader cited that the maximum number allowed should be less than 10, while a third stated that it should not be more than 7 per peer leader. Peer leaders stated that a high number of mentees in their sessions meant that they were not able to "cover" or "finish" all the topics for the subjects.

Data maintained by the institution showed that of the 28 peer-assisted learning sessions that were held each week in March semester, 2016, only three sessions had more than 10 peer learners – one session had 18 peer

learners, the other two had 17 and 16 respectively. These numbers, which were higher than the maximum of 10 students per peer learning session was to accommodate some peer leaders who requested to combine their peer learners and co-facilitate their sessions with another peer leader. As such, the actual number of peer learners per peer leader was still not exceeding 10. This applied to August 2016 semester as well. Of the 27 peer-assisted learning sessions held each week during that semester, 4 had between 15-17 peer learners in the group but each of these sessions was facilitated by two peer leaders. As such, the peer leaders' perception of high student number in the peer learning sessions seemed to indicate that an ideal number per session is much lower than that set by the institution.

3. Suggestions for programme improvements

Overall, the peer leaders provided 3 main suggestions to improve the programme – (1) to reduce the number of peer learners per session; (2) to increase the time allocated for each peer-assisted learning session; and (3) to increase peer leader “payment” for their services. There seemed to be a general consensus on the main reasons for asking to reduce the number of peer learners and to increase the time allocated for each session – that there was a lot to cover but there was insufficient time and too many students. This could be linked to the challenges that peer leaders had identified earlier. Peer leaders also suggested that the “payment” or “allowance” for peer leaders be increased from the current amount, although none gave a recommendation of a suitable figure. One peer leader mentioned that “peer leaders could be motivated through an increase in the earnings per hour.” Another peer leader mentioned that “a raise in allowance” might be able to “compensate” peer leaders for their mileage as some might have to come to the campus just for their sessions when they had no lectures or tutorials. Apart from the 3 main suggestions, there were other suggestions. Peer leaders also suggested that peer leaders be given access to eLearn for the subjects they had been assigned to for the programme. The peer leaders had access to eLearn for the subjects when they were enrolled on the subjects but at the time they were facilitating PALP peer learning sessions, they no longer had access to it. As one peer leader stated, “the lecturer may have changed the learning materials, changed emphasis or they may be new materials. It would help if we know what is going on in the subject.” Another suggestion was to provide more training to help them deal with different learners better. A final suggestion was to give students who were interested to sign up as peer learners for the programme a trial class so that they understood what peer-assisted learning sessions were and that these sessions were not meant to be tutorials. This might help reduce attrition rate as only students who understood what they would get out of the sessions would sign up.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of peer leaders of the Peer Assisted Learning Programme appears to have benefitted the peer leaders in gaining better understanding of the subjects that they facilitated – which helped their own studies. Beyond that, being peer leaders seemed to have contributed towards an increased self-awareness and positivity in their personal attitudes towards other learners who may be different to them and to each other. This could be gathered from the accounts provided by the peer leaders on the different methods that they had tried to support peer learning. Finally, but equally important, the peer leaders completed two cycles of the programme with improved communication and presentation skills, were better at leadership and had improved their own efficiency in time-management and project planning. All these, combined with increased positivity in their personal attitude, are traits and transferrable skills which employers look for. The peer leaders, through their engagement in the programme, had essentially engaged in continuous learning, where they learned to become a mentor, to help others develop and to take initiative to analyse and evaluate their effectiveness in order to solve both learning problems as well as manage their peer learning group. They had also improved their mastery of their subject matter. These are some of the meta-competencies for employability (Gardner, 2011).

However, peer leaders' feedback also indicated that there are also important considerations for programme improvements, specifically in training to prepare peer leaders better for their role and to provide continuous support for them. Firstly, from the peer leader feedback, it can be deduced that some peer leaders might not have been as open and as empathetic as they believed themselves to be. By assuming that peer learners' absence, irregular attendance and lack of preparation were due to the peer learners' lack of interest and commitment, some of the peer leaders might not have considered that there could be other reasons that were related to their peer learners' workload, personal matters or even how the learning sessions were facilitated. A

request that “peer leaders should have more training” was supported by the reason that “communicating with **those peers** who are lazy to do any work by themselves is tough” [emphasis added]. Although this was the strongest statement of blame, a similar perception had been communicated by others. Secondly, the peer leaders’ choice of words indicated that some of them still viewed their role to be the teacher during their sessions and that it was their responsibility to cover all the topics, or at least, all the important topics for the subject. It also appeared that they felt their responsibility included having to explain, demonstrate or do other things that were necessary to help their peers understand the subject better. While their role carried some elements of teaching, explaining and demonstrating, in a peer learning environment, it should be a collaborative effort which they facilitate.

There are some recommendations to improve future leaders’ experience with the programme and increase the benefits that they derive from it. (1) Increase the number of interim support for peer leaders. Short sessions with peer leaders should include self-reflection and group problem-solving strategies. Such sessions might help provide needed support to peer leaders while at the same time help engage them in critical reflection in order to develop openness to different learners and the challenges these learners may have. (2) Future peer leader trainings and continuous development need to continue to emphasise the differences between peer leader role and the teacher role. As peer leader feedback has indicated, putting an emphasis on the differences may not be enough. Peer leaders need to be trained and continuously supported so that they could use different active learning strategies which enabled their peer learners to contribute to learning sessions and for the peer leaders to genuinely facilitate the sessions. With their ability to adopt more and different learning strategies, peer leaders may learn to be more flexible in managing peer learners who missed some sessions. (3) Reducing the number of peer learners per learning session from the current 10 may not be possible. It puts more constraints on physical resources such as availability of venues and scheduling more sessions which were compatible with both the peer leaders and peer learners. However, a workable solution would be to provide specific training and support for peer leaders to be able to manage the number effectively. Finally, the decision on whether to increase the allowance given to peer leaders will need to be considered carefully to ensure that the programme can continue to be sustainable as student numbers to undergraduate programmes continue to increase.

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